

Exercises Strengthen Territorial, Federal Partners' Preparedness for Hurricane Season

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ST. CROIX, U.S. Virgin Islands – Last week, the Government of the Virgin Islands and federal partners participated in a series of response and initial recovery exercises as well as functional drills to bolster preparedness efforts before Atlantic hurricane season.

Participants established a unified command led by the territory and supported with federal resources from Emergency Operations Centers on St. Croix, St. Thomas and St. John and FEMA facilities while working together across the territory. The exercises were driven by a scenario of a Category 3 hurricane that had impacted the U.S. Virgin Islands overnight with conditions allowing for initial assessments and coordination.

“These exercises, allow us to assess our capabilities and make critical adjustments to ensure our territory’s preparedness ahead of hurricane season,” said Governor Albert Bryan Jr. “I want to thank our partners at FEMA and our lead Government agency heads for their continued efforts to maintain our territory’s readiness to respond and assist Virgin Islanders in the event of a natural disaster,” said Governor Bryan.

“I commend VITEMA and the Government of the Virgin Islands for their commitment to strengthening their capacity through planning, exercises and functionals drills in preparation of the 2023 hurricane season,” said Mark A. Walters, FEMA’s Virgin Islands Caribbean Area Office Coordinator. “While we cannot control the development of storms in the Atlantic, we can control how we prepare for and respond to all hazard events that may impact the community. While FEMA continues to support the U.S. Virgin Islands, it is also the duty of every individual and family to be prepared to protect themselves and loved ones by making a kit, having a plan and being prepared,” said Walters.



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“We must practice, practice, and practice again, until every agency, task force, and emergency operations center can safely and expeditiously execute these key initiatives as a team of multiple agencies and federal partners,” said Daryl Jaschen, Director of the Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency. “This is especially important for individuals placed in leadership positions. I am very proud of both our results last week and lessons learned, including the incorporation of the Virgin Islands National Guard, and have great confidence that we, as briefed by our key agency leaders to Governor Bryan on Friday, are ready to respond when needed throughout this hurricane season,” said Jaschen.

“I appreciated FEMA Region 2 Deputy Administrator Andrew D’Amora visiting from New York and joining in many activities this week, to include assessment of both airports. He provided encouragement and appreciation during our daily Command and Staff Meetings and mentioned many times the demonstrated strength of our federal and territory partnership,” said Jaschen.

The exercises were the Capstone event of a nearly six-month planning effort to prepare for the 2023 hurricane season. Last week’s event provided opportunities to integrate lessons learned from previous response efforts, address gaps with territorial or local resources and then identify federal resources necessary to respond to all hazards in the territory.

Evacuation sheltering and points of distribution functional drills held on St. Croix and St. Thomas brought this year’s exercises outside the emergency operations centers and into the field. The Virgin Islands Department of Human Services led the setup of evacuation shelters and points of distribution with the support of VITEMA and FEMA.

Other organizations supported the functional drills as well. The American Red Cross helped with registration into the shelters and the Virgin Islands Department of Education provided sites for the drill at Ivanna Eudora Kean High School on St. Thomas and Education Complex on St. Croix. FEMA staff acted as disaster survivors and observers for the sheltering drill.

The Virgin Islands Voluntary Organizations Active in Disasters and Virgin Islands Community Organizations Active in Disasters participated as disaster survivors in the St. Croix points of distribution drill. A venue was provided by the Department of Education at Central High School. FEMA staff helped set up and observed the



drill.

On St. Thomas, FEMA staff helped set up and acted as recipients of shelf-stable meals and boxed water for the points of distribution functional drill at Crown Bay Marina. The Virgin Islands Port Authority provided the venue.

Recovery was another new addition to this year's event. FEMA conducted trainings for territorial staff on how to conduct joint preliminary damage assessments for the Individual and Public Assistance Programs. This is important as damage assessments might be required to qualify for a major disaster declaration from the president.

The weeklong exercise, which occurred at 10 different sites and had more than 300 participants, concluded with a brief to Governor Albert Bryan Jr. at Government House on St. Croix. Leads from territorial agencies summarized exercises their agencies led, detailed their preparedness for hurricane season and reviewed ways to address challenges.

FEMA Region 2 Deputy Administrator Andrew D'Amora, Region 2 Senior Adviser Josie Arcurio, Federal Coordinating Officer Lai Sun Yee, Region 2 Incident Management Assistance Team lead Chris Allen and Walters attended the governor's briefing.

Other exercises occurred during the Capstone included:

- Operational integration exercises on how FEMA and VITEMA would integrate under a unified command after an event
- two days of social media simulation exercises
- Airfield assessments on St. Thomas and St. Croix to determine how and where to handle incoming resources deployed to a disaster
- Drills on how to operate in a degraded communications environment
- a patient evacuation tabletop exercise
- a medical needs shelter tabletop exercise
- a continuity of operations workshop for governmental agencies on how to operate after emergencies or disasters
- a law enforcement/federal security workshop.



In June and July, territorial and federal partners will concentrate on corrective actions that need to be strengthened for response and initial recovery focus areas.



*FEMA, the American Red Cross of the Virgin Islands and the Virgin Islands Department of Human Services participate in an evacuation sheltering functional drill May 24 at Educational Complex on St. Croix.
FEMA/Yanique Parson*



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The Virgin Islands Department of Human Services leads a point of distribution functional drill May 25 at Crown Bay Marina on St. Thomas. FEMA staff helped set up the drill and participated as recipients of shelf-stable meals and boxed water. FEMA/Russell Fox



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